

Little-Known GEMS

Low-profile state parks are treasures just waiting for you and your family to discover

BY LEE LAMB

No doubt you've heard of, if not visited, Lewis and Clark Caverns State Park. For decades, this crown jewel of Montana's state park system has delighted visitors with its breathtaking underground landscape of limestone stalagmites and stalactites and remarkable history of discovery and exploration. But you probably don't know that a few miles away sits another state park also rich in Montana history and its own unique above-ground sights.

In the early 1900s—about the same time Tom Williams first discovered and explored the caverns—homesteaders were moving into western Montana, building modest log cabins and farming their 160 acres through droughts and blizzards. Parker Homestead State Park is a remnant of that pioneer era and the hopeful, hardworking families who built this state. Along old Montana Highway 2 southwest of Three Forks, the two-room, sod-roofed cabin and shed were constructed by Nelson and Rosa Ellen Parker. While most original homesteaders' cabins have long since disappeared, the Parker structure



Parker Homestead

remains intact, thanks to Fish, Wildlife & Parks renovations that stabilized the roof and walls. The cabin's log walls and beamed ceiling exhibit craftsmanship that has helped the structure stand for a century. Outside is an old water pump and jackleg fence. Stand next to the cabin beneath the ancient cottonwoods shading the remote site. Gaze at the distant Tobacco Root Mountains and imagine what it must have been like to raise crops, cattle, and a family here. This is a piece of the authentic Old West that has all but disappeared from the New West.

At only 2 acres, Parker Homestead is Montana's smallest state park, but the historic site is well worth a visit. The park is one of many little-known gems in Montana's vast state park system, sites that don't receive much attention. Some are tiny, some are far off the beaten path, and others have simply escaped much notice. But each of these obscure parks, including the eight others listed here, makes an important contribution to Montana's history, culture, or recreation.

LEFT TO RIGHT: CAROL POLICH; CHUCK HANEY, MICHAEL & PAISY FRIBLEY; JUDY WANTULOK

Lake Mary Ronan

Flathead is the largest natural lake west of the Mississippi River. For a family weekend trip, it can be a bit overwhelming, like camping next to a vast sea. Far more human in scale is nearby Lake Mary Ronan, which, at 1,500 acres, is still plenty big for water recreation.

The state park at the lake is also manageable in scale. There's plenty of room for kids to run around, but it's not so big you need another zip code when moving from one campsite to another. The 120-acre park is a favorite with residents of Kalispell and nearby towns, who appreciate its many amenities.

Water is the feature attraction. Lake Mary Ronan sees a regular contingent of anglers who troll the lake for the kokanee salmon and westslope cutthroat trout FWP stocks each year. The lake also holds a strong yellow perch population as well as largemouth bass and pumpkinseed sunfish.

The lake is great for swimming, boating, and waterskiing. While the kids toss rocks and splash in the shallows, Mom and Dad can rest



Lake Mary Ronan

nearby in lawn chairs, dozing to the sound of lapping waves and giggling children. After the nap, the family can hike on any of several trails that leave the park and enter national forests or publicly accessible lands managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Greycliff Prairie Dog Town

Prairie dogs are small mammals that live in colonies, which once covered the Great Plains. Many people, especially nonresidents, have never seen a prairie dog colony and the constant activity of its squirrel-sized residents. Greycliff Prairie Dog Town is one of the most convenient spots in Montana to observe these lively communities. "People enjoy viewing prairie dogs, and Greycliff is a very accessible place to do so," says Terri Walters, manager of this and several other state parks in south-central Montana. "It's right off the interstate, you don't have to leave your vehicle, and you're almost always sure to see prairie dog activity."

The state park is 1 mile from the Greycliff exit on I-90, a few miles east of Big Timber. The site may seem deserted when you first arrive, but stop in the parking lot or anywhere along the 1-mile driving loop and wait. Before long the stout, short-legged rodents will emerge from their burrows. The colony's residents are fairly accustomed to humans, but you need to stay in designated areas and keep pets leashed if you hope to see the prairie dogs' interesting and often amusing antics. The animals dig burrows, forage for food, groom each other, and watch for predators. Keep an eye out for golden eagles or coyotes, the presence of which will send an entire colony scurrying for safety.

Thompson Falls

This is another fun family getaway site where kids can wear themselves out turning over river rocks and chasing crayfish in the shallows of the Clark Fork River. The river here is mellow with a slow flow, making it a great spot to swim in midsummer. The gentle cur-



Greycliff Prairie Dog Town

rent also makes it suitable for beginners to learn canoeing or kayaking. The river holds westslope cutthroat, rainbow, and brown trout. Along shore, visitors might see a mink, kingfisher, beaver, or white-tailed deer. FWP stocks trout in a small oxbow lake at the north end of the park for kids-only fishing. The little lake also holds frogs, herons, muskrats, and other wetland wildlife. It's a good place to watch for songbirds at dawn and dusk.

What about the falls? They were covered with water in the early 1900s when Thompson Falls Dam was built, several miles upstream of the park at the town of Thompson Falls.

Lost Creek

A visit to this pretty state park offers great opportunities to see mountain goats and bighorn sheep. Tucked in a deep canyon west of Anaconda off Route 273, Lost Creek is also home to moose, mule deer, porcupines, snowshoe hares, red-tailed hawks, and dusky (blue)

grouse. While you're glassing for goats and sheep that live among cliffs rising 1,200 feet above the canyon floor, note the pinkish white granite protruding diagonally from the gray limestone. Roughly 1.3 billion years ago, a shallow sea deposited mud that, over eons, compacted and hardened into limestone. As the Rocky Mountains began to uplift about 75 million years ago, molten rock was forced into limestone fissures, where it cooled into the granite you see.

Another park highlight is Lost Creek Falls, at the end of a short, paved, wheelchair-accessible trail. If you're up for a longer jaunt, hike the U.S. Forest Service trail beginning north of the falls parking area and winding along Lost Creek for several miles. The creek holds trout, so bring a rod if you like to fish.

Anaconda Smoke Stack

Near Lost Creek is the historic Anaconda Smoke Stack State Park. Visitors cannot actually enter the massive smelting stack, but they can view the 585-foot giant from the park, on the city's eastern edge.

Completed in 1919 by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company, the stack at the Washoe Smelter served as a chimney to carry away

Tower Rock

Lewis and Clark buffs will not want to miss Montana's newest state park, on the Missouri River halfway between Great Falls and Helena on I-15. Tower Rock is where Captain Meriwether Lewis determined that the Great Plains ended and the Rocky Mountains began. On July 16, 1805, Lewis wrote, "At this place there is a large rock of 400 feet high which stands immediately in the gap which the Missouri makes on its passage from the mountains.... This rock I called the tower. It may be ascended with some difficulty nearly to its summit and from there is a most pleasing view of the country we are now about to leave."

The Corps of Discovery had only recently completed its arduous circumvention of the Great Falls. Tower Rock marked the expedition's entrance into the Rocky Mountains, where even greater troubles would soon begin.

Sure-footed hikers can climb to the upper reaches of Tower Rock to see Lewis's view. Visitors can also hike along the rolling quarter-mile trail that skirts the rock on its east side. There they are treated to another far-reaching view of the plains.

the shootout between federal agents and rum-runners in the 1987 movie *The Untouchables*.

Pirogue Island

Four months after the stop at Tower Rock, the Corps of Discovery finally reached its goal of the Pacific Ocean. The following spring, the men headed back to St. Louis. After successfully traversing the Rocky Mountains, the group decided to split up. Lewis selected a more northerly route, while Clark journeyed down the Yellowstone River, where he camped on a large island on the outskirts of present-day Miles City.

Now known as Pirogue Island State Park, the site is popular with hikers, mountain bikers, horseback riders, bird watchers, agate hounds, anglers, and even deer hunters (shotgun or bow only). Visitors can reach the island from the mainland most of the year by crossing a dry side channel. When water levels rise during early summer, the only dry access is by boat from the Yellowstone River.

White-tailed and mule deer, wild turkeys, Canada geese, wood ducks, and dozens of songbird species live in the island's mix of cot-

pavilion below the jump protects several interpretive signs that describe how native people prepared for the hunt, lured bison to and over the plateau, skinned and butchered carcasses, and prepared food, clothing, shelter, and tools from the meat, hide, and bones.

"This is definitely a park you'll want to explore on foot," says Jerry Walker, FWP parks manager for southwestern Montana. Visitors might come across a tipi ring, uncover an arrow point, or find an eagle catch pit, which archaeologists believe Indians used to lure and capture the raptors for their plumage. (Be sure to leave any artifacts you discover where you found them.) The steep hike to the top of the jump is grueling, especially in warm weather, but it's worth the effort. From there you can see the Madison River and Tobacco Root Mountains to the west, the Gallatin River and Bridger Range to the east, and the jagged Spanish Peaks to the south.

The list of Montana's little-known state park gems goes on and on. There's the ghost town at Elkhorn, boating and waterskiing on Hauser Reservoir at Black Sandy, and river frontage tipi rentals at Beavertail Hill. Explore the historic Thompson Chain of Lakes by boat from Logan. Fish for stocked rainbows at Ackley. Launch your

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Lost Creek



Anaconda Smoke Stack



Tower Rock



Madison Buffalo Jump

smoke and gases produced during copper smelting. Interpretive signs at the park describe how workers built the smokestack and smelted ore mined in nearby Butte to make the valuable metal. Visitors can learn how the smelter contributed to the local and state labor movement and economies, and how Marcus Daly, Anaconda's founder, built Montana's ore smelting and refining empire.

By some accounts, the smokestack is the tallest free-standing brick structure in the world. To help visitors grasp the magnitude of the structure, FWP staff have placed interpretive signs along a circular walkway. The exterior edge depicts the stack's octagonal base, 93 feet in diameter, and the interior edge represents the stack's top, 60 feet across. Not surprisingly, this is the nation's only state park dedicated to a smokestack.

Lee Lamb is a writer in Pablo.

"Tower Rock is one of the few places along the Lewis and Clark Trail where you can literally walk in the footsteps of members of the Corps of Discovery," says Tom Reilly, assistant chief of the FWP Parks Division. "A person hiking the trail can be fairly certain that Lewis walked up that same route. And because the surrounding landscape is almost undeveloped, you'll see many of the same things he did."

Mule and white-tailed deer frequent the park, and you might even spot a bighorn sheep scaling adjacent cliffs or elk grazing on open hillsides nearby. Because the park lies in the transition zone between prairie and mountain habitats, it displays an interesting mix of plant life. This is one of the few places where prairie species such as yucca and blue grama grow beside mountain varieties like wild rose and western snowberry.

From the top of Tower Rock, look south along the river for Hardy Bridge, 1 mile upstream. The silver steel structure was the scene of

tonwood forest, meadow, and riparian habitats. Agates practically line the riverbed, and lucky visitors have found ancient remnants of buffalo skulls, bones, and teeth in the gravel bars.

"Pirogue Island offers a little something for everyone, whether they like to fish, watch birds, walk their dog, treasure hunt, or just sit and watch the world go by," says John Little, FWP's southeastern region parks manager.

Madison Buffalo Jump

Long before Lewis and Clark stepped foot in Montana, generations of American Indians lived here in an environment that could be both bountiful and unforgiving. Madison Buffalo Jump State Park, south of Logan, demonstrates the ingenuity of a culture that learned to conquer a beast that outweighed the average man by half a ton and provided nearly everything a tribe might need for the year. A covered

kayak at Finley Point and explore the Flathead Lake shoreline.

Montana is home to 50 state parks, ranging from 2 to 12,000 acres in size, where visitors can find everything from family camping spots and fishing accesses to historic sites and American Indian culture. Reilly says Montana offers state parks for every comfort level and interest—including those such as Parker Homestead and Lost Creek that so far have been discovered by just a handful of visitors. "These parks may not be as prominent as Bannack, Lewis and Clark Caverns, and some of the other famous spots," he says. "But our state park system would certainly be incomplete without them, and both residents and nonresidents are missing important parts of the Montana experience if they don't stop by and take a look for themselves." 🐾

For more information on these and other Montana state parks, visit fwp.mt.gov/parks.

LEFT TO RIGHT: CHUCK HANEY; CHRIS BOYER; STEVEN ANGE; CHUCK HANEY